

Exposed ~ Part 2

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Category: Animorphs

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-04-26 09:00:00

Updated: 2000-04-26 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 16:30:54

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,603

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: From the ashes, came Part 2 of Exposed! I highly recommend that you read Part 1 and the Prologue or you'll be confused

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> Chapter 1

> **

**** My name is Tobias.

> And something had gone terribly wrong.
 < Nooooooooooooo! > I screamed as the community center burst, spraying flame and shrapnel everywhere. I watched as a black figure that was a Bug Fighter burn a hole through an already shredded building. I watched as the slight ripple in the air seem to stop and hover over this mess. I watched as everything fell apart.

> < This is not happening, > Whispered Marco.
 Almost simultaneously, we landed in the woods that skirts the huge community center, just a little far enough to be out of prying eyes and demorphed. Or at least, most of us demorphed. I watched as my friends, at a speed I thought was impossible for morphing or demorphing, morph into human or andalite. Orange and yellow beaks quickly sucked into faces with a SHLOOP! Beaks turned to pink as it softened into lips, or some kind of lip-like structure like Ax had. Feathers melted like wax and tightened into skin. Ripping talons flattened and blew up like a balloon as they changed to feet or hooves.

> Eyes evolved from fierce, yellow eyes into brown, blue, green, or gray eyes. One by one, they finished demorphing and sent shocked glances toward the community center.
 "This is seriously not good," Cassie said between ragged gasps, "I mean, if the building burns to the ground, people will see everything! The entrance to the yeerk pool, the yeerk pool itself!"

> "We need to tell Erek," Jake exclaimed.
 < And Rachel, > I replied, still shocked from what I was seeing.

> "Let's split up. Marco, Cassie, Tobias," Jake said almost smoothly

and seriously, "find the nearest phone. Call EreK, and get him here as soon as possible. Ax and I will tell Rachel."
 < How can she get here while she's sick? What about her parents? Won't they be a little worried that their sick child is missing? > I wondered.

> "I guess we'll have to take that risk, now go," Jake exclaimed and started running toward town. I noticed that Ax morphed to human immediately. He was doing it especially rapidly.
 < Tobias, Cassie, Marco, you don't have to wait for me. You need to reach EreK, > Ax reported.

> Marco and Cassie ran as fast as they could into town to find a phone. I took the air and did an aerial search. I looked down at houses, stores, mini-malls, police cars, Fire trucks, probably to extinguish the community center fire, but no phones. I noticed a small pizza restaurant with a large window and in the window, there was a pay phone, next to an alley.
 < Cassie, Marco? > I said to get their attention, < I don't see a phone anywhere. There's a restaurant near here, maybe they have a phone there. I'll morph into human in the alley. Meet me in front. >

> No sooner did I finish the sentence I landed in an alley, behind a dumpster, and morphed into a human.
 I concentrated and reddish brown feathers melted into pink flesh. A hard, curved beak melted into pink lips. Harsh, ripping talons turned into soft feet and toes, my whole body growing all the time. Bones shifted position and became the heavy, clunky bones of a human. Glaring eyes reshaped into almost expressionless human eyes. The morph was complete. I thought for a second. The restaurant would never let us in! We were dressed in spandex and wearing no shoes. Desperately, I looked around. Human eyes are so poor. Oddly enough, I found about six pairs of sandals beside the dumpster. I put my now human feet into a pair that looked like they would fit me. They were dirty and a little too big, but other than that, they were in pretty good condition. I picked up two pairs that were just about Cassie and Marco's size and walked in front of the restaurant. They were waiting impatiently.

> "I brought a present," I said and held up the sandals.
 "Where did you find those?" Cassie asked, her eyes suddenly getting wide.

> "Beside the dumpster. Now let's hurry up and call EreK," I exclaimed.
 "How are we going to call EreK? We don't have any money," Marco reported.

> "Call collect. We can't talk to him directly about this, but we can get him here without getting the yeerks too suspicious," Cassie retorted.
 Cassie and Marco quickly slipped on the sandals and walked in the restaurant. We found a pay phone on the side wall. Marco picked it up and called collect. After saying his name, we put all our ears to the receiver and heard ringing.

> "Hello?" A voice I recognized as EreK said.
 "It's such a beautiful day, isn't it?" Marco replied

> "Oh crap."
 "Yeah."

> "I'll be at the woods in ten minutes."

****Chapter 2**

>

**** We were all behind the dumpster, shaking and babbling like idiots. Instead of staying at the restaurant, we decided to morph to birds and haul butt to the woods. Yet again, we could only shake off our troubles and morph. But this time, I looked away from the changing bodies that were my friends. Right then I thought about more than just morphing. I thought about all the people who died in the explosion. How many burned? How many were hosts to yeerks? How many

were free? How many were just babies? I felt a pain in my shifting spine. I worried for a moment. Was the stress affecting my morphing? As I was going through the final changes, I realized that it was not. Sometimes when you're thinking of a loss of people you do or don't know, you ache. You ache from shivering. You ache from crying. You ache from pure thought. How many people in that building were just children? How many were leading the perfect life I've never had? How many mothers and fathers and people who cared were with them? Then it hit me. Why would the parents be with the children at The Sharing's community center? Most of them must have been controllers. That fact snapped me to reality.

> <lt; Are you okay Tobias? > Cassie asked. I guess she noticed that I wasn't doing anything.
 < Oh. Yeah. I'm fine,> I replied, snapping awake.

> <lt; Yeah, we're doing just dandy. We just fought for our lives, a building just exploded, and a yeerk pool is exposed in broad daylight, > Marco retorted frankly.
 < I think we should get going, > I said, getting back into the subject. In a flutter of wings, three birds of prey, a red-tailed hawk and two ospreys took the air.

> I flapped like mad for the community center. There was no time for lazily surfing on thermals now. We have to do something, but all we can do now is await our destiny. As I flew, I looked for a sign of Rachel. Jake said that he would get her over here, but I was worried for her. Was she well enough to come over here?
 _Of course she is, _I reassured myself, _she's only been sick for a little while. She'll be all right. _

> But then I knew better. I knew Rachel. If she wasn't well she'd just lie about it. It's a grim assumption, but it's true. She was a true warrior.
 We passed the gray roads of the city, passed row after row of trees, into the setting sun. We finally passed the last of the trees leading to the community center. Even in the fading light, I could find the community center easily. Black smoke rose from the roof. Red, orange, and even purple flames were seeping through the collapsing matter of what was left of the building. Large red fire trucks were parked in the driveway with firefighters rushing out with hoses spraying water all over the burning building. Even with water spraying on the building, the fire raged. A small crowd was formed around it, made up of mostly known human controllers. From the air you could see a hole right in the middle of the structure leading into a stone stairway. Even from the ground you could tell that the stairway was leading into something huge and sinister. I look toward the trees where Ereka said he'd meet us.

> <lt; You guys get in the trees, out of sight, and demorph. I'll keep watch for Ereka and the others, > I said. I could see two ospreys, identical ospreys, land in the trees and disappear. I continued over the trees to look for something, anything, that was a sign my friends were coming. I searched madly for anything between the trees. As I was getting farther and farther from what was once the community center, I saw two figures running like mad. I recognized them as Ereka and Rachel, her hair seemed to gleam in the dying light. I saw Ax and Jake in bird morph, spread fairly far apart, flying over them.
 < Tobias, go to the entrance of the woods. We'll meet you there, > Jake reported.

> The sun was setting fast. There were almost no more thermals or tailwinds as I changed course to fly to Cassie and Marco. The sky was turning a dark blue and my vision was fading. The only thing that helped me, yet haunted me, was the burning community center. Even now, hours after it burst, the flames rose high enough to singe my feathers as I flew over it. I saw the silhouette of my friends as I

landed in an old oak branch. Cassie and Marco were there, both sitting with their legs crossed. Marco had his head in his hands, a gesture Marco doesn't often do. I could hear Rachel and EreK approaching. As they ran near, two birds, a peregrine falcon and a northern harrier, tumbled on the ground with a soft, "Whoosh!" and almost immediately grew larger. Ax and Jake had arrived. As Jake's beak sucked into his face, Rachel and EreK arrived.
 "What happened?" Rachel asked in disbelief, "What did I _miss_?"
> "It's a long story," Jake said just as feathers melted from his arms. He sat up, the morph was complete.
 "Wow," EreK commented, his holographic eyes widening.
> "Rachel, EreK, here's what happened," Jake exclaimed and cleared his throat, "we were spying on The Sharing's meeting, and everything was going pretty well, for a meeting of The Sharing, when Visser Three came."
 EreK nodded. Rachel blinked her eyes rapidly and glared.
> "He met with the members, when everything went ugly," Jake continued, "EreK said something that made Visser Three angry, and he was to be sent to the Taxxons. We decided to take action. We had a battle. We ended up retreating, and as the Hork-Bajir, Taxxons, and Human Controllers were leaving, one of their ships went insane and crashed into the building."
 "We had an incredibly a lovely day," Marco commented sarcastically.
> < Marco did not use much sarcasm when he saw the building burst. . . > Ax recoiled.
 "This is getting scary. First Marco forgot to make a joke and Ax makes fun of him; this _is_ a bad situation," Rachel replied with a half mocking smile Rachel always makes.
> "We have to find something to do," Cassie reported.
 Suddenly, I heard a rustling outside the trees. I went airborne to see what it was. It was hard to see in the dark. My vision was not much better than a human's vision in the dark, but at least I could hear them. I could see two shadows walking toward the trees. It was Chapman and Visser Three in human morph. They were arguing.
> < Uh, Guys? > I got their attention, < Chapman and Visser Three are coming, fast. I don't think you can morph fast enough! >
 "Uh-oh," Marco said.
> Just then Chapman and Visser Three entered the mouth of the small woods near the community center.

****Chapter 3**

>

****It was a good thing that my friends were just out of reach of any wandering eyes.

> "What'll we do?" Cassie wondered aloud.
 "No problem," EreK replied almost smugly, "I can use my hologram."
> "Did I ever say that you're a lifesaver, EreK?" Jake commented.
 As Jake was speaking, a large new tree appeared in the woods. Almost at that same moment, Chapman and Visser Three came into view.
> < Guys, I can hear them talking, > I reported and I strained my ears to hear, < I'll get in closer. > I flew towards the two shadows walking in the woods.
 "But Visser Three, if we do that-"

> "Silence," Visser Three retorted, "don't you ever contradict me, or your head will be rolling on the floor before you can say anything more about my plan."
 "Ye-yes, Visser, but we can't just break out in open war on this planet," Chapman reported.

> "Visser One is responsible for the secrecy," The Visser continued, "and she will soon be executed, along with me if I don't come up with new hosts quickly."

> The Visser sneered, "And the humans have no idea of our presence so they won't be able to fight back before they become ours."
 "And when will we begin?" Chapman asked the Visser, shaking.

> "As soon as possible," The Visser replied, "before you know it, I may even become Visser One. The present Visser One will be disposed of."
 Chapman gasped. "You don't mean you want to-"

> "Of coarse I do." Visser Three smiled a sinister smile. "I will rule and the planet will be ours."
 In the tree that was Ereks hologram, I heard a groan.

> <lt; Guys, did you hear that? > I said, more worried than I had been since we first stepped in that seemingly desolate construction site.
 < Yes, and Tobias, we'll have to stop this before Visser Three lets it happens, > Ax replied, the only one who could answer without being heard.

> <lt; I'll get in closer, > I exclaimed, darkness clouding my rapidly beating hawk heart.
 "But that would be treason, Visser," Chapman said simply, now twitching. I guess he was worried about what the Visser was talking about. One thing was for certain, I definitely was.

> "Visser One is already treasonous, I will just be silencing her ways," The Visser retorted, "and with open warfare we will rule this planet more efficiently, no more slow pace."
 Chapman opened his mouth to counteract, but quickly closed it, knowing what Visser Three was capable of.

> "Now we are out of sight from any meddlesome humans, I have no use for this body," The Visser exclaimed and, quite suddenly, eye stalks rose from his human head. Chapman cringed as the Visser's body grew a large, muscular tail and a scythe blade that gleamed in the night. His back suddenly thrust backward, and a back that resembled a deer grew from it. Human legs shifted to hooves, and new hooves appeared on his front side, balancing out the rapidly growing back side. The Visser's eyes grew larger, almond-shaped, and human body hair grew and turned blue. As quietly as I could, I glided into Ereks hologram. I didn't need to hear anything more. Chapman and Visser Three had stopped their conversation and continued through the woods.
 The air shimmered as I entered the hologram. Quite suddenly, it was as if I had entered a giant see-through bubble. Everyone was sitting or standing up, starrng wide-eyed at me.

> "Did you hear that?" Marco demanded, "Open warfare! This is insane!"
 "Marco, about Visser One-" Cassie tried to say.

> "I know, and Ax is right, we have to stop him," Marco continued.
 "We'll do this, Marco," Jake said, sounding determined, "If not for us, but for her." We all knew what Jake meant by "her." Marco's mother. The host body of the infamous Visser One.

>

****Chapter 4**

>

**** We just stood there, in the hologram, for a long time. No one said anything. In that moment, I saw Rachel. She was pale. Her eyes looked glazed. I realized this wasn't a simple flu, after all. But what could we do? Cassie spoke up, breaking the silence.

> "We have to do something about this. If we don't, the odds will be even worse than they are now. Anyone have any ideas?"
 "We have to get the source of all this," Rachel exclaimed, almost in a trance, "We have to get Visser Three."

> "But how do we do that?" Marco wondered, "We've fought him countless times, and he's still here, making threats about our

species."
 "The disturbing thing is," Marco went on, "I'd bet on this guy."

> < We can always try, > I said, not quite sure of myself.
 "Oh, you're a real ray of hope, Tobias, even you know a real 'hero' died from him. You know who the 'hero' is, Ax can tell you, he knew-"

> "Shut UP Marco!" Rachel fumed.
 "Can't you just learn to be quiet, it wasn't Tobias's fault Elfangor had to-" Suddenly, Rachel wavered and sat down abruptly, as if she'd been punched in the stomach. Her eyes closed.

> "Rachel? Rachel! Are you okay?" Cassie exclaimed and rushed to her, holding one side up.
 This was going to be a big problem. What could we do if Rachel didn't get better? What could we do if Visser Three started an open war? Why had Marco exploded like that? My mind was swimming with emotions as the seven of us, Jake, Cassie, Rachel, Marco, Ax, EreK and I sat and watched in horror of what was happening.

> EreK stepped towards Rachel, his android eyes even looked worried.
 "I can take her temperature," He offered and put a metallic hand on Rachel's pale, sweating forehead.

> "The all-purpose EreK," I heard Marco mutter as his eyes fixed on EreK and Rachel.
 EreK crouched there for a moment, seemingly soaking up the details.

> "Uh-oh."
 "What is it, EreK?" Cassie asked.

> "Rachel's temperature is almost 102 degrees. We need to get her home, quickly," EreK exclaimed and took his hand off Rachel's forehead.
 "Tobias, see if it's clear," Jake said.

> I opened my wings and exited the hologram. The air shimmered as I entered the cool night air. I could hardly see in the gloom, but I could hear fairly well. I heard nothing suspicious. Just the scampering of a squirrel, the rustle of the wind, the sniff of a mouse's nose peeking out of a hole, seeing if there was any danger.
 < It's all clear, > I said. Suddenly, a huge, dark tree disappeared, revealing Cassie, Marco, and Jake standing upright, Ax standing poised, his tail cocked and ready for trouble. The tree seemed to shift into the image of a medium height, brown haired boy with a tall, pale, blonde haired girl, asleep in his arms.

> "Cassie, Marco, go home. Ax, morph to harrier and see if they get home in one piece, EreK, can you carry Rachel all the way to her house without getting tired?"
 "Is the pope catholic? Of coarse I can," EreK replied.

> "I'll go with EreK to Rachel's and I'll explain to her parents. Tobias?" Jake reported and turned his eyes on me.
 < Yes? >

> "Follow us from the air, just in case anything suspicious happens,"
 < Aye aye captain, > I exclaimed and took wing over the woods. I could see three shadows jogging onto one direction of the road and the flutter of wings as a harrier took to the air above them. Going the opposite direction, the shadows of Jake and EreK with Rachel in EreK's arms heading, as far as we knew, to certain doom.

>

****Chapter 5****

>

I watched the moon shine on my friends as we walked to Rachel's house. Rachel was dangling in EreK's wonderfully strong, yet delicate arms. I checked periodically to see if she was still breathing, and, thankfully, she always was. The walk home was pretty much uneventful. No shadows looming behind our friends, no cars were on the road. All

we could do is let today's events sink in. Somewhere in that slow moving moment in time we started a conversation.

> "What should we tell Rachel's parents?" Erek wondered aloud, hardly noticing that a feverish girl was lying in his arms.
 "She said that she'd tell her parents she was running," Jake replied.

> < So we just say we saw her while she was running, and saw her drop, > I said, checking to see if she was breathing yet again.
 Jake looked skyward and said, "What would I do without you, Tobias?"

> Right then the road curved into Rachel's neighborhood. They were almost there.
 "Jake, Rachel's parents will never believe I carried her all the way here. Take her legs and I'll carry the rest," Erek exclaimed while Jake grabbed hold of Rachel's thin, pale legs in his arms. I felt I should've been there to help. I glanced at Rachel's house. Yellow lights shined in the windows amidst the gloom of night. I looked in one window in particular. Rachel's sisters and mother were there. Her sisters, Sarah and Jordan were laughing at the TV. Rachel's Mom picked up the phone. A few seconds passed, and, in those few seconds, her mother turned ghostly pale. She held the receiver of the phone and told Sara and Jordan something. Probably an explanation told by Cassie about Rachel. I took my eyes off of that scene. Too much suffering, too much violence, too much pain today. I couldn't look. Instead, I checked Rachel again, and Rachel, like the warrior she was, was breathing almost normally. Erek and Jake reached the door, panting. Erek took an arm off of Rachel, and knocked on the door. Almost immediately, Rachel's Mom opened the door, phone in hand, and gasped when she saw Rachel.

> "Oh," She exclaimed, "Rachel!" She turned to Erek and Jake with a guilty look.
 "Jake, thank you for bringing her here," she continued, "she'll be fine now." She then took Rachel in her arms, flinched, and brought her down a hall. Just as that happened, Rachel's sister, Jordan, came to the door.

> "What happened to Rachel? Is she gonna be okay?" She asked with a shocked look in her eyes.
 "We saw her when she was running, and my friend Erek and I started talking to her. While we were talking, she just collapsed," Jake lied.

> Jordan eyed Jake and Erek as if they had done something wrong. She glanced around, as if checking to see if anyone was watching her.
 "I think something's happening to Rachel, but she won't tell me," She exclaimed as her eyes became watery, "It's like she won't trust me anymore." She tried to suppress the tears, but a teardrop rolled across her cheek.

> "She'll be okay," Erek said simply.
 Looking embarrassed, Jordan closed the door. Jake and Erek broke into a run.

> "We have to get the others. Erek, Tobias, go to each other's houses and tell them to be at the barn at midnight. I should go with you, but I'm in deep with my parents," Jake ordered.
 < Of course, oh fearless leader, > I replied.

> As Jake departed toward his house, Erek ran for the streets and I glided through the velvety night, toward Cassie's house. This wasn't over yet. In fact, it hadn't even begun.

****Chapter 6**

>

**** It took a while to get to Cassie's house, even while flying. It's even more difficult in dead, night air. That left me time to think. So many things happened in this very day. None of which could really sink in. I have been through many things. Bullies, cruel family members, personality crisis, being made a pawn, false trust,

loss, confusion; torture. All in the past. But what would the future bring? What would happen to Rachel? What would happen to Marco's mother? What would happen to Visser Three? What would happen to the human race? One false move and everyone could fall. And on this day, we had made false moves. Too many false moves. Now the tightrope we were walking on became thinner. Our already struggling shoulders were loaded with more weight. The question was: how much weight could we hold before we break down? Dark thoughts filled my mind as I neared Cassie's house. I was almost thankful when I reached the house. I searched the yellow lighted windows of her house and didn't find her. I flew to the open windowsill in her room. She wasn't in there. That made me nervous. She was usually in her house if I needed her. There was one more place she could be. The barn. I flew around her house to a large, red barn in the back. I flew inside, flared my wings, and sunk my talons to the rafters. Sure enough, I found Cassie, feeding and watering the animals. She had a small deer with a burned leg scurrying in her arms as she refilled the water bowl of an empty cage.

> < Hey Cassie, > I said while I began to preen my feathers.
 "Oh, hello Tobias," She replied, letting the hyperactive deer back into its cage.

> "Anything happen with Rachel? Did she get home okay?" Cassie asked with a worried look on her face.
 < Nothing bad happened when we brought her back, but she wasn't looking very good, > I replied.

> "Do you think she'll be okay? I mean, we need her, especially now," Cassie exclaimed.
 < Honestly, I don't know, Cassie, I don't know, > I continued, < There's more, Cassie. Jake wants us at the barn at midnight. I have to get to Ax. >

> At that, I flew out of the barn toward Ax's scoop. Ax's scoop isn't very far from Cassie's barn, but in the night, it's hard work. I strained my muscles to rise meters above the barn. But, as I knew, It would be easier to just use my energy on flying forward, but for every bird, altitude meant distance. I couldn't get very high, but at least I could get high enough to spot Ax, a blue blur in the night, running in the meadow where he built his scoop. I spilled air from my wings and dove toward a tree in the outskirts of the meadow. As I gained speed, the ground seemed to rush at my talons at an angle. The yellow grass sped by at top speed. An exhilarating experience, even if you were an expert. The tree was just yards ahead of my speeding body. At that millisecond, I flared my wings, muscles screaming, and caught the branch just in time for-
 < AAAAAAAH! > I screamed as a tail blade raced for my branch. Ax's tailblade stopped millimeters from the branch.

> < I'm sorry, Tobias, I did not know you were on the tree, > As apologized and relaxed his tail.
 < You scared the living pee out of me Ax! > I gasped as my raptor heart raced miles a minute.

> < I will be more careful next time, Tobias, > Ax replied, < Any news from prince Jake and Ereka? >
 < Yes. We're having a meeting at midnight tonight at the barn, > I reported, my frantic bird heart finally relaxing.

> < It seems this mission never ends, > Ax exclaimed.
 < Exactly, > I continued,

> < Approximately one hour and fifty-seven minutes, > Ax replied.
 < I'm gonna get some rest before we go. I have a feeling this won't end soon. Wake me up when it's time, > I said and took wing toward my meadow. The meadow isn't far from Ax's scoop. Anyone could easily walk there in two minutes. I was thankful. I was exhausted. I used the last ounce of strength weaving through the trees to my meadow. The fact that I could hardly see made the task even harder. But, sure enough, I sunk my talons into the sweet branch

I used to sleep on. I closed my piercing, raptor eyes and almost immediately fell asleep. I decided sleep would be a good thing. I had a feeling I wouldn't get any sleep for a long time.
> <ax,>

****Chapter 7**

>

**** I was woken by the sounds of crashing debris and crunching grass. As my eyes snapped open, I saw Ax stroll daintily under the tree I was sleeping on.

> < It's time, Tobias, > Ax reported.
 < I gathered that, > I replied grumpily.

> < How did you know I was coming?> Ax asked, sounding a little annoyed at the fact that I knew.
 < You know, everyone can keep sleeping if a blue alien centaur with a bladed scorpion tail crashes under their tree, > I retorted.

> < I was trying to be silent, > Ax stated.
 < Try tiptoeing next time, > I exclaimed, < Let's go. >

> With that, Ax, a strange yet beautiful creature, galloped toward Cassie's barn. I opened by wings and flapped, with great difficulty in the dead night air, to Cassie's barn. Though I was almost blind at night, the moon illuminated the way to the barn. I could hear Ax trotting below and I could see the silhouettes of a few, scattered, and rather clumsy birds flying toward the Barn. We were right on time. Usually some of us were up to a half hour late, by the looks of it, this was not a situation to be late for. The air was quiet as I entered the rafters of the barn. Cassie and Jake were already there, shoveling hay and what I thought, and certainly smelled like, manure. As I perched in my usual space, Jake wiped his forehead and put down his shovel. Cassie seemed to get the hint and propped her shovel next to the shovel Jake was using. Within seconds, Ax daintily trotted in, looking extremely out of place in such a normal place, while a second bird fluttered into the barn, crashing on the floor. The bird's feathers abruptly melted into skin, like wax, and the bird itself grew larger. Marco was here.
 When the final changes took place, Marco said, "You know, I was having a wonderful visit to dreamland when an alien robot dog told me that I had to go to a barn at midnight to meet an alien, two kids, and a bird. My life is perfectly normal. It couldn't possibly be INSANE at all."

> I chuckled. Even as awful as this mission might turn out, Marco would be there, making jokes.
 "Marco, you forgot someone," a shadow appeared outside the barn door. "What happened to the alien robot dog?"

> The shadow stepped into the dimly lit barn, and a clean looking boy with a confident smile appeared, not revealing what was truly underneath that smile. Ereka had arrived.
 "If only Rachel was here," Marco continued, "she'd be flirting with the bird-boy and joking with the robot dog. It seems so...empty without our little Xena."

> At that, everyone laughed. If Marco joked, it usually meant the mission would be a "normal" one. However you can describe a bunch of kids and an alien morphing into animals or other aliens to defeat a parasitic race of slugs being normal.
 "You guys," Jake said to quiet us down, "we have a mission. With the yeerk pool exposed we have only one choice."

> "Forget about it and hope Visser Three patches it all up?"
 "No, we go in."

> "Marco, did you heard what Visser Three said, this could mean open war. We have to stop him, or at least slow that from happening,"

Cassie reported.
 "And we have to do this soon," Jake continued, "so we morph to birds, meet at the trees outside, morph something small, and go in. Tobias can drop us in the yeerk pool, and when no one's looking, he can go in himself. Then we go to power morphs. Show them that this isn't their planet to fight openly. And Ereka, stay outside and watch from outside in case anything happens."
> "But what if a fight in the yeerk pool doesn't work. Hardly any of our trips to the yeerk pool were actually success stories," Marco wondered aloud.
 "With the community center gone, it'll be easier to weaken the yeerks without the yeerks weakening us," Jake retorted.

> < But what about Rachel? We're also weakened without her, >
Ax countered.
 "We have to try, even if Rachel's gone. Let's go," Jake replied.

> At that, my friends, Ax, Cassie, Jake, and Marco started to morph and Ereka walked out of the barn, once again toward the community center. By the time Ereka walked out the door, my friends were shifting, shrinking, and changing. Marco's lips suddenly popped out and hardened, forming a ripping, tearing beak. Cassie's dark, soulful brown eyes shifted into the fierce, golden eyes of a raptor. There was a thump as Ax's four legs prematurely turned into two, shrunk, and made Ax's shifting body fall to the ground, chest first. Jake's pale arms suddenly broadened and sprouted the brown feathers of a falcon.
 < You guys ready? > I called as the final changes occurred in my friends' bodies.

> < I believe so, > Ax reported.
 < Ready as we'll ever be, > Cassie said.

> < Let's do it! > Marco exclaimed
 < Marco, > Jake retorted playfully.

> < Just filling the queen's throne, > Marco replied.
 When that was finished, four birds took to the air. The only thing that was missing was Rachel. She should've been here. All I could do is imagining her there. Her image in my head gave me hope. And as it turned out, we were going to need it.

>

****Chapter 8**

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**** *******Our wings struggled in the dead, night air. The darkness nearly blinded our usually piercing raptor eyes. But we were determined. Determined to erase, or at least make up for, the mistakes we've made. My muscles burned in the cool, clear night. Though the night was clear, regret clouded my mind. What had we done? We'd found a way to weaken the yeerks, yet nature itself found a way to weaken us. What if something happened to Rachel? We knew that her sickness wasn't a simple cough, but we weren't sure that what Rachel had was a true disease. We could only hope it wasn't.

> In the moonlight, I could see the charred remains of the community center. The fire had died down, but the building was smoking. An eerie foreshadowing of what could happen in the mission ahead. Firefighters were still on the job, spraying what was left of the community center in case the smoldering remains would ignite again. If you were close enough to the building, you could even see the real danger. You could see the real threat. You could see the very essence of an invasion of earth. You could see the entrance to the yeerk pool. We could either use that to our advantage or our demise. Because of a mistake, our mistake, Earth could be doomed. We had to do something, or else.

> I strained my eyes to see what was happening. Even late at night,

crowds were gathered around the ruins of the building. Most of which were senior members of The Sharing watching for anything unusual. Yet what pained my heart was that some innocent people were there crying. Crying on the shoulders of members of The Sharing. They must have known that The Sharing was a seemingly appealing, unbiased organization. They couldn't have known the real truth. Amongst the crowds, in a group of high ranking controllers, was Erek, standing in a parking lot and looking confused, like all others there. And, like The Sharing, no one could have known that was an act, like everything else. He was just playing his part.
 When we caught sight of Erek, Jake called to him with thought-speak.

> < We're here Erek. Everything look okay? >
 When Jake called him, Erek didn't even twitch. A moment later, he made an "okay" sign with his fingers. As far as we could see it, nothing unusual was happening.

> We landed in the trees skirting the community center, out of view of any prying eyes.
 < Tobias, keep a look out if anyone sees us, > Jake said. I took wing above the trees to see if anyone was coming. Though my eyes were no better than a human's at night. But with the moonlight lighting my way, I had less of a problem. The dreary sight of the once new community center and the people, Sharing members, Controllers, firefighters, and friends and relatives of the people in that building was disturbing, even to an impaired eye. As I kept watch, I realized that no one would come this way. The controllers somehow had gathered around the entrance to the yeerk pool, blocking the view. Or hiding something else. We had no way of knowing.

> < Okay, Tobias, we're ready, > Jake called from his insect morph on the ground. I spilled air from my wings and landed on the grass, next to two cockroaches and one housefly.
 < Beam us up, Scotty, > Marco exclaimed as the bugs crawled on the top of my talon.

> < You guys ready? > I asked my now tiny friends.
 < We're fine, Tobias, let's go, > Cassie retorted.

> I took off for the burned community center. The dead air made my wings strain. The wind blocked my way. But we were going to do this. We had made too many mistakes earlier. Dead air and a breeze couldn't block our way, no matter how hard the wind was blowing. Ahead I could see Erek. He was talking to a girl from The Sharing. A controller, no doubt from the way every few seconds she looked over Erek's shoulder, on to the wreckage. When she looked, there was no sadness in her eyes, just alarm. Paranoia.
 < Erek, we're about to go in. Make a diversion, > I called from my spot in the air. Suddenly, a small animal scurried from the wreckage.

> "It's them! Get him!" He shrieked and pointed to a fox that crawled from the staircase. Sharing members rushed, pushed, and shoved through spectators to get to that fox. When the crowds diminished, running toward this "bandit," I spilled air from my wings and swooped for the entrance to the yeerk pool. A large, dirt staircase rushed at top speed for my talons. The air rustled my feathers as I dove. Only dead air supported my feathers. The stairs were about to hit me! I banked upward hard, muscles screaming. Suddenly, a slight breeze blew into the chamber. That was all I needed. I flapped hard and hugged the ceiling. If there was any chance of not being seen, it was to hug the ceiling. Suddenly, artificial light flooded into the chamber, and I could see like the raptor I was. The stairs seemed to wind forever, and I found it hard to keep hugging the top. A musty smell wafted into my nose. Yet there was something missing. Something I should have been paying attention to. The dirt steps suddenly turned to hard stone. As the smell got worse, I listened for sounds coming from the pool. I heard nothing but occasional footsteps and splashing of a

thick liquid. But I heard no sounds from innocents. I figured since the building burned, not many people were in the pool. Finally, the stairs opened up into a vast chamber. A chamber so vast a mall could be put there two football fields on the sides. I could see the pool itself had grown considerably. Shadows loomed everywhere. But what really disturbed me was the cages. Huge cages the size of a small jailhouse were in the corner. And inside, rattling bars, yet almost silent, were the innocents. A Hork Bajir guard was watching the cages closely. As that sight came into view, I turned for an open, yet impossibly dark storage area. I looked downward, one last time. No one noticed me. Strange. While still hugging the ceiling, I glided into the storage area. I scanned the area. The only shadows inside were boxes. I landed behind a large stack of boxes, hiding me from view. My talons scraped the concrete floor. I looked down and saw my friends on my talons. Four insects. There should have been five. We were going into a battle without Rachel. But we had to do this.
 < Tobias, are we ready? > Jake asked from my talons.
> < We're ready. We're in a dark, box-filled storage room. No one will find us here. The insects crawled on to the floor and almost simultaneously, they grew. I looked away. Morphing was always gruesome, especially when morphing insects. Even when I looked away, I could hear the sounds. The SLURP of legs sucking into chests. The grinding of bones being formed. The sloshing sounds of organs forming. All of the sudden, it stopped. The morph was complete. I looked toward my friends again. All human except Ax. Jake took a moment to catch his breath and said,
 "Battle morphs, you guys." He crouched down to morph. Orange and black fur rippled and sprouted across his body. Sinister teeth formed and grew inside his mouth. Yellow, tiger eyes formed from his usually brown eyes. The others, except Ax, were also morphing. Cassie's ears slid upward to the top of her head and became pointed. A muzzle grew from her human jaw. Fingers shrunk, hardened, and became the hard paws of a wolf. Marco was sprouting black fur everywhere. His nose flattened out, becoming the nose of a gorilla. And Ax was still Ax. A walking weapon. Ready and poised for combat. When I looked back to my friends, they were rough and battle ready in their strongest morphs.
> < Let's go, > Jake commanded and pawed out of the storage area. Soon enough, he broke out at a full run and I flapped hard to catch up with him. Artificial light hit us once we got out of the storage room. What was strange was that no one was in the pool area. No one except for the people in cages. But they were eerily quiet. Jake stopped and roared.
 "ROOOOOOOOOOOOEEEEEEAAAAAAR!"
> And suddenly, we were not alone.

****Chapter 9**

>

** *****Silhouettes loomed from the shadows of the yeerk pool. Hork Bajir, Taxxons, and humans appeared from the nooks and crannies of the pool. Suddenly, the Hork Bajir who was guarding the cages was opening the barred doors of the cages and letting the humans and Hork Bajir inside the cages out. The "prisoners" walked calmly toward us. The others just stood there. I flapped hard to keep hugging the ceiling. Yet I was weakening. The humans, Hork Bajir and Taxxons in the yeerk pool calmly sauntered toward us, making a circle. There must have been about seven Hork Bajir, six humans and three Taxxons. One Hork Bajir in the center was holding a dracon beam. We couldn't have beaten them. And in the midst of this scheme, there was an abomination. Visser Three calmly walked toward us, hooves clop, clop, clopping on the floor.

> < Ah, so glad you could come, andalite bandits, > He said, evil seething out of his every word. You couldn't help but be scared if a voice that evil, that vile talked to you. You would be even more scared if he was making threats. And there he was, a leader of an invasion, almost at the very top of a hierarchy, a vile, menacing creature, sauntering toward us like a predator lurking toward his helpless prey. The Hork Bajir with the dracon beam leveled his weapon at us, waiting for any of us to make a move while the Visser was speaking.
 < With this building incinerated, you thought you could weaken us. But you did the opposite, oh yes. For this is a dawning of a new era. With the council on my side and Visser one disposed of, I will make this planet mine, > Visser Three continued, my insides quivering with every word.

> < Dispose of them, > The Visser ordered, < I would be doing the honors but I have a planet to conquer. > With that, Visser Three calmly turned away to his new destination. I knew, deep in my panic stricken heart, where he was going.
 The armed Hork Bajir hesitated for a second. That gave me just enough time to-> "TSSSSSSEER!"
 I spilled air from my wings and dove at top speed toward the dracon beam. My talons opened, grabbed the weapon from the Hork Bajir's hand, and raked his arm.

> "Gharfesh! Andalites!" he screamed.

> Jake, with liquid grace, lunged toward the Hork Bajir, smacked him on the head with one powerful orange-and-black blur, and tossed him onto the floor. The Hork Bajir was knocked out, bloody and without a weapon.
 The weapon weighed me down significantly. It was a good thing Ax was in my range.

> < Ax! Catch! > I yelled and dropped the dracon beam into his hands.
 Ax knew what to do with that weapon. He seemed to fiddle with it with his fingers quickly, put his fingers on the trigger and-

> TSSSSSSEW!
 A red beam sliced into two humans and a Hork Bajir, knocking them out cold. Suddenly, a wolf lunged and sliced into a Taxxon, green fluid spewing from the wound. The other two Taxxons rushed to their fallen friend, and opened their mouths wide. They slurped, gulped, and chewed at a fellow Taxxon in an insane feeding frenzy. Suddenly, there was no more flesh to eat. In a desperate hunger, they started ripping and tearing at their own bodies. They were destroying themselves! I looked away. One less gruesome sight.

> That left four humans and five Hork-Bajir. Ax was having no problem with himself. A natural weapon and a powerful, yeerk made weapon slashing, shooting, slashing; shooting. So far he had taken out two humans and three Hork Bajir, by himself. I focused on a Hork Bajir, running for his life to the stairs. I couldn't let him leave here without a fight. I flapped hard, straining muscles, at the monster. He may have been fast on foot, but I was faster in the air. I dove down on him, aiming for his eyes.
 "TSSSSSSEER!"

> I raked his face, bluish blood spewing out of the wound. I didn't think he would be able to see ever again. He clutched his eyes and slashed at the air, shaving off part of my tail. The pain was intense. A part of my backside was spilling blood from the ceiling of a huge complex. The Hork Bajir I cut thankfully collapsed on the ground. I looked around. My friends had destroyed everyone. Except one person. There was only one human left, and Ax was pointing his weapon point blank at her.
 "You andalites think you're the masters of the galaxy, prancing around the universe arrogantly. Now we will be the true lords! We have this planet in our fingertips! Does the number of nearly six billion hosts sound frightening to you? We will win this plane-"

> TSSSSSEW! Ax shot the dracon beam at the controller, knocking her to the ground, unconscious.
 < Let's go! Demorph as you go up the stairs! Ax and Tobias! Morph to human, > Jake commanded and ran for the stairs, his body already shifting. I was beginning to get dizzy from the wound. The blood was everywhere. Suddenly, my wings lost balance and I fell, crumpled and bleeding, to the ground. I decided that was a good time to morph. The first thing that happened was my eyesight. It changed from piercing hawk eyes to dim, blurry human eyes. There was a grinding sound as my talons formed into feet, and legs sprouted, growing like a plant on a fast motion camera, out of my tail. Brown feathers melted into pink skin, like wax. Broad wings grew into slender human arms. Finally, my beak flattened out and became soft, forming a human nose and mouth. The morph was complete. I sat up, regaining my strength. Ax was still in there with me, experiencing the last changes.

> "Let's get out of here," I exclaimed as I climbed to my feet. Ax, stumbling on two human legs, climbed up the steps to freedom. I ran all out. I couldn't wait to get out of here and into the air. To sleep. To visit Rachel. As I neared the top, I noticed my friends were there, stairing up at the sky. There was something wrong, I knew it. I quickened my pace, and soon enough, I was stairing with them. We didn't need words to tell each other what was going on. We could plainly see it. The disturbing thing was, they let us see it. The sky was littered with red lights. Bug Fighters. A mideval torture divice, made to slice the sky. And among them, was a black against black. The Blade Ship of Visser Three. The true invasion had begun.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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>Writer's Note:
So there ends Part Two! I hope you enjoyed it! I'll have a much better note and thank yous when I finish the last part. And if you have any comments, questions, or critisism mail me at Falcon795@aol.com<a>

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file.